

# FAITH AND FEMINISM : EVANGELICALISM, FEMINISM, AND THE CULTURE WARS IN THE USA, 1970S TO THE PRESENT

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## Abstract

Given the influence of the evangelical population in American society and politics, understanding the forces that have shaped the evangelical movement is vital to enriching our knowledge of American politics and culture. This thesis seeks to explore evangelical feminist activism and thinking in light of the culture war. It argues that the culture war is real and that it has affected religious expression and identities in conservative Protestantism. Evangelical feminists represent the progressive side of evangelicalism in a culture where traditional gender roles continue to provide symbolic meaning and identity to the majority of American evangelicals. The reality of the culture war is on a symbolic and cultural level where feminism and evangelicalism represent opposing positions of progressivism and orthodoxy. Evangelical feminists represent a group of women (and men) who seek to bridge the gap between the two worldviews at a time when evangelicalism at large came to stress traditional family life as a way to distinguish themselves from mainstream American life. The thesis looks into how evangelical feminism wanted to affirm the evangelical Christian faith and test the traditional evangelical approach to the Bible, theology, and social concerns.

Chapter two gives a brief introduction to the historical and social context of evangelical feminism and the main organizations and people that shaped it. The chapter maps out the network that made it possible to develop an evangelical feminist movement, and shows the relationship central evangelical feminists had to the larger evangelical movement. The focus is on how evangelical feminists were part of an effort to redefine evangelicalism. Evangelical feminists related to a conservative Christian movement which did not support feminist claims and which has become an important factor in the support of conservative politics. As such, evangelical feminist activism reflects the culture war within the evangelical movement.

In chapter three, I use three books to illustrate how evangelical feminists sought to redefine evangelical gender theology from what they saw as an unbiblical and sexist stand to a feminist vision of gender equality. I will outline the hermeneutical principles that lay the foundation for evangelical feminism, mapping out the theological stance by four of the most influential thinkers at the beginning of evangelical feminism. These authors entered a mine field of theological debate over how to understand the Bible as revelation. The meaning of evangelical feminist hermeneutics cannot be comprehended without referring to the opposite side of the debate and the theological tradition evangelical feminists related to. Consequently, parts of the chapter will address the clash between feminist and anti-feminist voices in American evangelicalism.

In chapter four, I take the evangelical feminist newsletter Daughters of Sarah as an example of how the clash between feminism and evangelicalism shaped evangelical feminist ideas and identities. It illustrates the tension within evangelical feminism, and the development of the evangelical feminist movement. Whereas the previous chapter deals with how evangelical feminists approached the Bible, this chapter looks into how they struggled to find a common feminist platform. The focus is on how evangelical feminists struggled to understand feminism in light of their faith, and vice versa. I will look into how the mechanics of the culture war impacted evangelical feminism and show how the polarized public debate tested the identity and focus of evangelical feminism. Some references to the larger evangelical movement will be made.

The last chapter focuses on the larger organizational and social development. I seek to understand what happened with the larger evangelical community and why evangelical feminism remains a minority. I conclude that evangelical feminism remains a minority in the evangelical community, and that the majority of American evangelicals continue to identify themselves by adhering to traditional gender roles. However, most evangelicals practice gender roles like other Americans. Evangelical feminists have contributed egalitarian tools to the to the evangelical "cultural tool box." The present conflict over the Today's New International Version (a Bible gender neutral/gender accurate translation from evangelical publishing house Zondervan) is an evidence of the continuing battle over cultural symbols in the evangelical community and shows that concerns raised by evangelical feminists in the 1970s continue to shape the evangelical debate.



Feminism in the United States refers to the collection of movements and ideologies aimed at defining, establishing, and defending a state of equal political, economic, cultural, and social rights for women in the United States. Feminism has had a massive influence on American politics. Feminism in the United States is often divided chronologically into first-wave, second-wave, third-wave, and fourth-wave feminism. Feminists and Women's Studies scholars often refer to feminism's "three waves," particularly in America and Great Britain. This metaphor was first introduced in the 1970s as a way for second wave feminists of the 1960s and 70s to acknowledge their activist foremothers, women like Alice Paul, Elizabeth Cady Stanton, Susan B. Anthony, Ida B. Wells, Lucretia Mott, and others from the 19th and early 20th centuries, and to denote strong "peaks" in feminist activism and protest in history. The first wave of feminist movement in America is often referred to as the Suffrage Movement and early feminis... Evangelical feminists represent the progressive side of evangelicalism in a culture where traditional gender roles continue to provide symbolic meaning and identity to the majority of American evangelicals. The reality of the culture war is on a symbolic and cultural level where feminism and evangelicalism represent opposing positions of progressivism and orthodoxy. Chapter two gives a brief introduction to the historical and social context of evangelical feminism and the main organizations and people that shaped it. The chapter maps out the network that made it possible to develop an evangelical feminist movement, and shows the relationship central evangelical feminists had to the larger evangelical movement. Multiple feminisms have represented the efforts of women to live to their full humanity. But the movement is more than that, and it dates back centuries. It focused on sexual assault and harassment in the workplace and elsewhere. Social activist Tarana Burke first coined the term "Me Too" in 2006 in connection to sexual assault among women of color, but it gained popularity when actress Alyssa Milano added the social media hashtag in 2017. In the early 1970s, a group of progressive evangelicals challenged the mid-century cultural conservatism of their tradition. Activists associated with Reformed, Anabaptist, and neo-evangelical institutions denounced militarism, racism, sexism, economic injustice, and President Richard Nixon's "lust for and abuse of power." This article suggests the centrality of identity politics to evangelicalism in the 1970s and outlines the fragmentation of the progressive evangelical coalition along gender, racial, and theological lines.